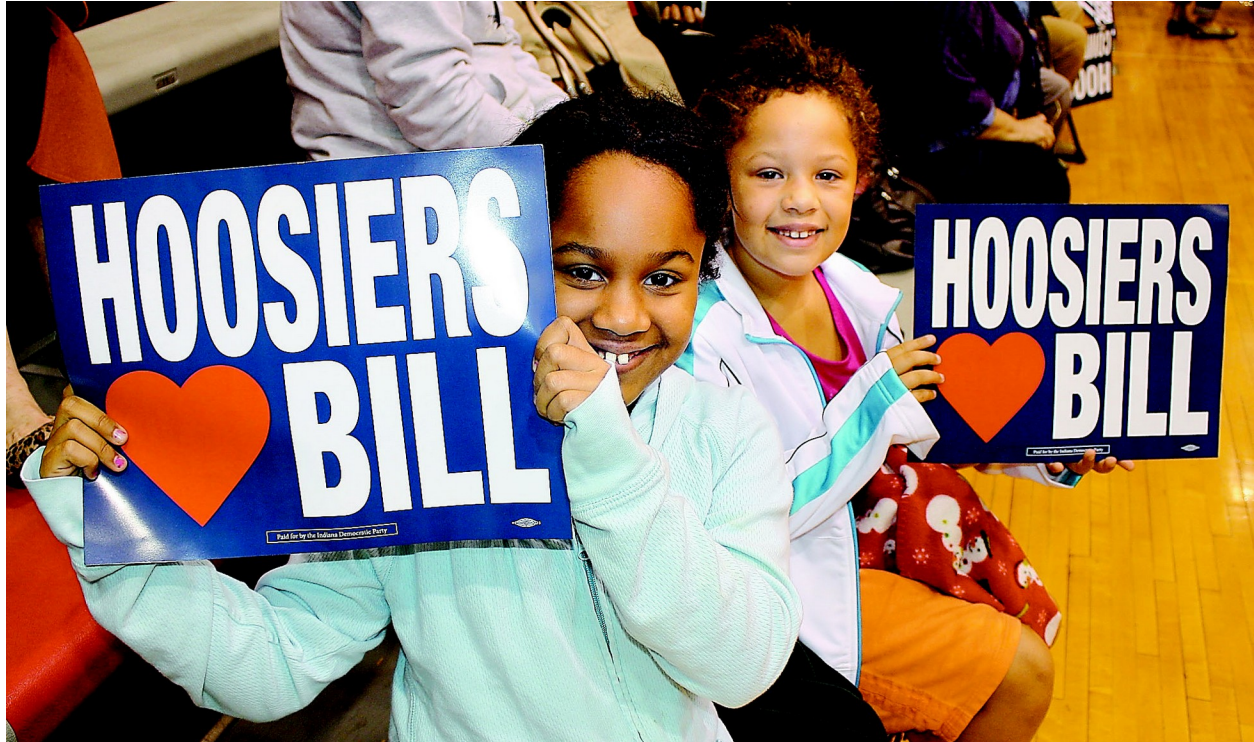


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KT photo | Rob Burgess

FUTURE VOTERS: Tatiana Avila, 9, and Kayli Avila, 7, both of Indianapolis, hold signs at Former President Bill Clinton's speaking event Friday.

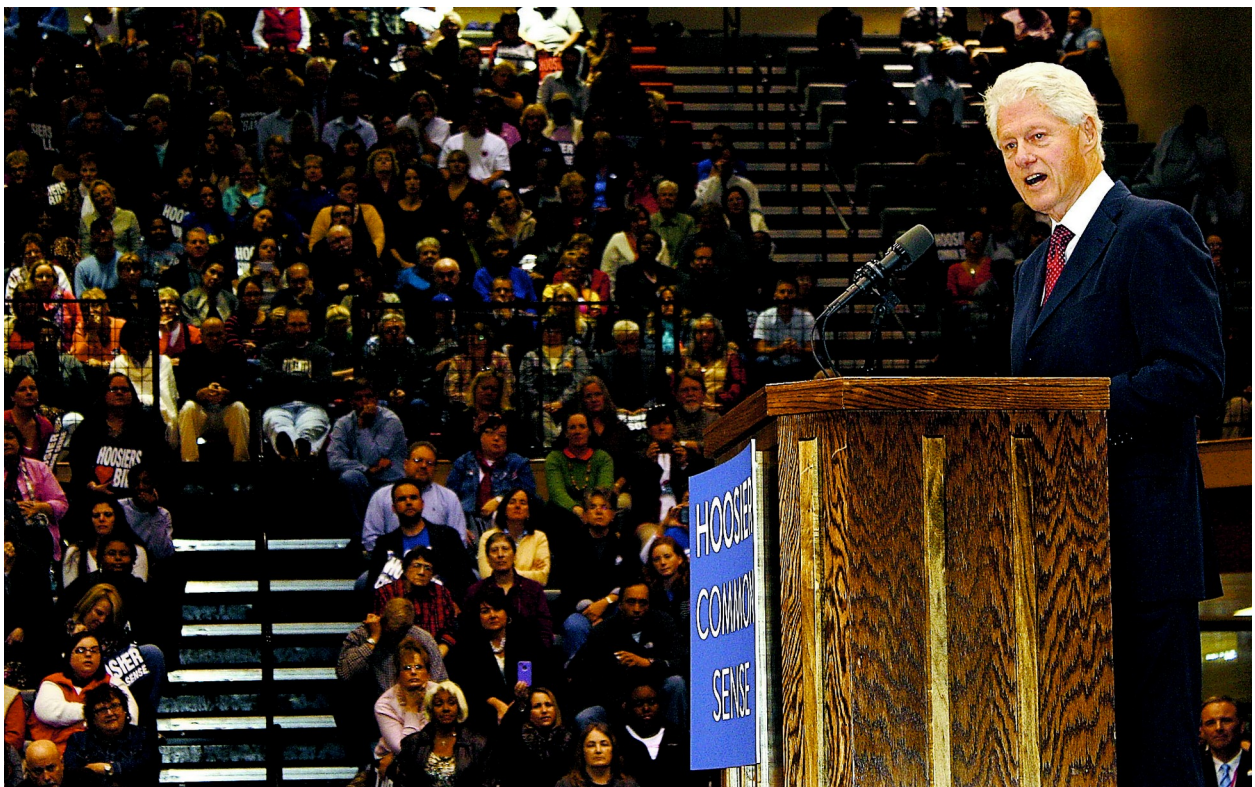


KT photo | Rob Burgess

GETTING OUT THE VOTE: After speaking in Indianapolis, Former President Bill Clinton poses with Democratic candidate for Senate, Joe Donnelly, left, John Gregg, Democratic candidate for governor and former governor and senator Evan Bayh.



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Clinton fires up Dems in Indy

Former president campaigns with Donnelly, Gregg

By Rob Burgess and Megan Graham

Tribune staff writers

INDIANAPOLIS — Former President Bill Clinton paid a visit to the Hoosier state Friday to speak to a crowd of 3,000 at the “Hoosier Common Sense Rally” at North Central High School in Indianapolis.

Clinton, on the day after his 37th anniversary with Secretary of State Hilary Clinton, breezily talked jobs, education, bipartisanship and the automotive bailout—or as he says, “restructuring,” and championed Democratic candidates Congressman Joe Donnelly (D-IN), who is running for U.S. Senate, and John Gregg, who is running for governor.

Clinton had tough words for Donnelly’s opponent, State Treasurer Richard Mourdock and was critical of Gregg’s opponent, Mike Pence, for not supporting the auto industry. Clinton challenged Mourdock’s questioning the constitutionality of Social Security and Medicare.

The former president also pushed the merits of decent living wages.

“If good people are working too hard for too little and don’t have enough to support their kids, it is a constraint on economic growth for everyone,” he

said.

Clinton also reiterated the need for affordable tuition for college students. He talked about Dwight Eisenhower's National Defense Education Act, which Clinton received a loan from to help finish his education, and the necessity to have loans students can feasibly repay.

"Every state in the country is having trouble funding its university system and community colleges and vocational schools and job training programs because revenues are tight," he said. "People are scared they can't pay the bills."

When discussing the 2009 auto bailout, he spoke of his refusal to call it a "bailout."

"It was not a bailout. It was a restructuring that we as taxpayers participated in because the banks were unwilling to save the automobile companies," he said. "You got 120,000 jobs at stake in Indiana, but there were more than a million people in auto parts supply business and in the supply chain whose jobs were on the line. ... Now, all those jobs are safe, there are more than 250,000 people working making cars more than the day the bill was signed, and auto sales last month reached a 4-year high."

Hoosier Democrats began assembling with free tickets for the 10:30 a.m. start to welcome their fiery former president and state candidates. Also speaking were Indianapolis City-County Councilwoman Maggie Lewis, lieutenant governor candidate Vi Simpson and Congressman Andre Carson.

Fifth district congressional candidate Scott Reske led the Pledge of Allegiance.

Clinton's presence in Indiana is a sign that much might still be undecided here. In a state where splitting tickets is nothing out of the ordinary and solid red turned blue in 2008, the home stretch to election day has begun, and Democrats called for common sense and working to get folks out voting.

Clinton stole the show at the Democratic Party's national convention and his presence Friday in Indiana was a notable encore. A new Pew Research Center poll found that 29 percent of those surveyed said Clinton's speech was the highlight of the convention. A Gallup poll released in early September showed Clinton was viewed favorably by 69 percent of Americans, including 43 percent of Republicans and 68 percent of independents.

Clinton's presence similarly galvanized those in attendance Friday,

including Judy Rowe, Angola, who sat in front row wearing a T-shirt featuring President Barack Obama.

“He’s an awesome speaker,” she said of Clinton. “He was a terrific president. He’s kind of the standard bearer for our party after Barack Obama.”

Hoosier Democrats didn’t even field a candidate in the 2006 senatorial elections. Rowe said Mourdock’s ousting of Sen. Richard Lugar in the Republican primaries presented a unique opportunity to win the seat.

“I am so excited,” she said. “We’ve really got an opportunity to take this seat. Richard Mourdock is terrifying, not just to Democrats, but to a lot of my Republican friends as well. ... There would be no race probably if it were Richard Lugar, realistically. I can’t even imagine why [the Republicans] did this.”

Rep. Gail Riecken, who represents Evansville and the rest of the 77th District in the Indiana House of Representatives, said with Lugar’s exit, the race would be an unprecedented fight to finish to fill the vacuum.

“Mourdock is from my area, so I have some preconceived ideas on why I think he shouldn’t be in the race and why he shouldn’t win,” she said.

“Lugar has always been so supportive of southern Indiana. It was a disappointment to see that he lost on that side. ... I think the race is one that we have not seen probably the level to which people are going to go to see that Joe Donnelly does not win. But he’s got a great opportunity.”

Rowe said Lugar, while not a perfect candidate, was a statesman who was known for reaching across the aisle, unlike Mourdock who has stated publicly that “bipartisanship ought to consist of Democrats coming to the Republican point of view.”

“Democrats did not fear [Lugar],” she said. “There isn’t the fear that there is for Richard Mourdock. You could work with [Lugar].”

Riecken said she wary of the stark contrast of styles between Lugar and Mourdock.

“Murdock has said publicly that that is not his style, and that’s not what he’s going to do,” she said. “That is Joe Donnelly’s style. And anyone that is in legislature, a local city council, county council, knows that you cannot progress if you cannot work across the aisle and we need progress.”

Meanwhile, Tatiana Avila, 9, and Kayli Avila, 7, both of Indianapolis, were there more for the life experience than the politics.

“I know that this is one thing that you get to do [once] in your whole entire life,” said Tatiana Avila. “Our grandmother got free tickets from the radio and we really wanted to come because I always wanted to meet a president, well, an ex-president.”

“I think it’s really exciting,” said Tatiana Avila.

- CNHI’s Melissa A. Conrad also contributed to this story.